**Homework: Cultural Identity**

*Dear Talbot:*

*What are Americans? What am I? What is my cultural identity? I’ll bet you never asked yourself those questions in a cultural sense before, have you? Those are important questions to ask if you are going to understand the impression you will make in another country! People all over the world have impressions of Americans. At one time, there was a phrase “The Ugly American.” Here’s why:*

***The Ugly American*** is the title of a 1958 political novel by [Eugene Burdick](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eugene_Burdick) and [William Lederer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Lederer). The novel became a [bestseller](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bestseller), was influential at the time, and is still in print. The book presents, in a fictional way, the experience of Americans in Southeast Asia (Vietnam) and allegedly portrays several real people, whose names have been changed.

The novel takes place in a fictional nation called Sarkhan (an imaginary country in Southeast Asia that somewhat resembles [Burma](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burma) or [Thailand](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thailand). The book describes the United States's losing struggle against [Communism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communism)—“because of its innate arrogance and the failure to understand the local culture.” In the novel, a Burmese journalist says "For some reason, the [American] people I meet in my country are not the same as the ones I knew in the United States. A mysterious change seems to come over Americans when they go to a foreign land. They isolate themselves socially. They live pretentiously. They're loud and ostentatious.”

Questions for you to prepare:

1. ***Look up the words in “red” in a dictionary or on the website*** **[http://dictionary.cambridge.org](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/)*[/](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/).***
2. ***Jot down the first definition for each on a piece of paper. When you have finished, do some thinking before we discuss tomorrow in class. Read “Think about this” next.***

*Think about this: Do you think “ugly” means physically ugly in the term “The Ugly American”? The character in the book was physically ugly, to symbolically emphasize the point! What could “ugly” mean then, if not just physical ugliness?*

1. ***Answer this question on the same paper: What do you think “ugly” means in this expression?***

*Read this definition of “The Ugly American:* used to refer to perceptions of loud, arrogant, demeaning, thoughtless and [ethnocentric](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/ethnocentrism) behavior of [American](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States) citizens mainly abroad, but also at home. Although the term is usually associated with or applied to travelers and tourists, it also applies to US corporate businesses in international situations.

1. ***Look up the word “ethnocentric” on*** [***http://dictionary.cambridge.org/***](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/)

***Jot down the definition again on your paper. Read the paragraph and answer the questions on your paper.***

*For discussion with your partner: If you meet someone in another country or culture, they may still have this stereotype of Americans. Is that fair? Do you think of yourself as an “Ugly American”? Do you know anyone who acts like the definition? Certainly not ALL Americans are “Ugly Americans,” right? How can you be self-aware in regards to your behavior and not to fall into this stereotype?*

*These questions should get you wondering about whether you think of people from other countries or cultures in a stereotypical way. There are stereotypes and there are generalizations.* ***It is important to know the difference!*** *We will get into the distinctions in tomorrow’s class discussion.*

*First, I want you to think about your cultural identity. Your cultural identity is uniquely yours, and you should not be stereotyped simply as “American” although generalizations can be made about American culture because of the TENDENCIES shared by Americans because we are a PRODUCT of our own culture.*

*Profe Pickett and Frau Spring will give you an exercise to do in class for homework called “You as a Culturally Diverse Person.” This is an independent exercise, because your cultural identity is uniquely yours. We’ll find out what it is tomorrow!*

*Sincerely,*

*M. Hampton*